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ABSTRACT

A child's ability to read is at the very foundation of his or her learning in school and plays a significant role in scholastic success. Although no one literacy model can ever represent the range of diverse learners in our schools, Cunningham, Hall, and Defee's literacy model known as Four-Block attempts to meet the needs of as many learners as possible through their multilevel, hands-on, developmentally appropriate literacy model. During a 6-week period of time, the researcher worked with 22 students in the experimental group using the book "Making Words" (Cunningham). This book implements the "Working with Words" block of the Four-Blocks literacy model created by Cunningham, Hall, and Defee. Using "Making Words" the researcher worked 15 minutes each day with the experimental group on the various multi-level, hands-on, and developmentally appropriate spelling and phonics activities. The children in the control classroom received phonics instructions in various forms, but did not receive the 15 minutes a day instruction from the "Making Words" activity book. After the period of 6-weeks, the researcher tested the 22 children in the experimental classroom and the 20 children in the control classroom by giving them an Informal Reading Inventory. Then the researcher compared the data from each classroom. An independent t-test compared the instructional reading levels of both the experimental and control first grade classrooms. In the "Working with Words" block of the Four Blocks reading program, "Making Words" was used. After the experimental classroom was exposed to the "Working with Words" block, no difference was found at the .05 level of significance from the control group in their average instructional reading levels tested by an Informal Reading Inventory. The researcher retained the null hypothesis. (Contains 32 references and a table of data. Permission letters are attached.) (RS)

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A COMPARISON OF FIRST GRADE CHILDREN THAT RECEIVE INSTRUCTION IN THE "WORKING WITH WORDS" BLOCK OF THE *FOUR BLOCKS* LITERACY MODEL AND FIRST GRADERS WHO HAVE NOT RECEIVED THIS INSTRUCTION

An Action Research Project

Presented to the

Department of Teacher Education

Johnson Bible College

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Arts in

Holistic Education

by

Dawn Morris

July 2001

CS 217 666

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APPROVAL PAGE

This Research Paper by Dawn Morris is accepted in its present form by the Department of Teacher Education at Johnson Bible College as satisfying the action research project requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Holistic Education.

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ABSTRACT

A child's ability to read is at the very foundation of his or her learning in school and plays a significant role in their scholastic success. In schools today, the pendulum has swung back and forth from one trend to the next in reading instruction as teachers search for the best way to teach children how to read. While the pendulum continues to swing, children are falling through the cracks of academic success. There is a need for educators to critically examine current models of reading instruction to eliminate what is ineffective and to discover the most effective ways to teach reading. Although no one literacy model can ever represent the range of diverse learners in our schools, Cunningham, Hall and Defee's literacy model known as *Four-Block* attempts to meet the needs of as many learners as possible through their multilevel, hands-on, developmentally appropriate literacy model.

During a six-week period of time the researcher worked with 22 students in the experimental group using the book *Making Words* (Cunningham). This book implements the "Working with Words" block of the *Four-Blocks* literacy model created by Cunningham, Hall and Defee. Using the *Making Words* book the researcher worked fifteen minutes each day with the experimental group on the various multi-level, hands-on and developmentally appropriate spelling and phonics activities. The children in the control classroom received phonics instructions in various forms, but did not receive the fifteen minutes a day instruction from the *Making Words* activity book. After the period of six-weeks, the researcher tested the 22 children in the experimental classroom and the twenty children in the control classroom by giving them an IRI. Then the researcher compared the data from each classroom.

An independent t-test compared the instructional reading levels of both the experimental and control first grade classrooms. In the "Working with Words" block of the *Four Blocks* reading program, Cunningham's phonics activity book *Making Words* was used. After the experimental classroom was exposed to the "Working with Words" block no difference was found at the .05 level of significance from the control group in their average instructional reading levels tested by an Informal Reading Inventory. The researcher retained the null hypothesis.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Problem

Teachers find themselves at a crossroad regarding the best way to teach children how to read. This crossroad marks the point where different reading programs intersect with individual children's personal needs. Children are unique in the way they look, the way they act and especially in the way they think. This uniqueness creates difficulty in the teacher's role of ensuring success in each child's educational career. A child's ability to read is at the very foundation of their learning in school and plays a significant role in their scholastic success. In schools today the pendulum has swung back and forth from one trend to the next in reading instruction as teachers search for the best way to teach children how to read. While the pendulum continues to swing, children are falling through the cracks of academic success.

Weak reading programs produce weak readers. Some children need a little longer to solidify new information. Unfortunately, many children get run over by new reading programs that try to teach them how to read in the most efficient ways. The obvious problem of the many different reading programs created to improve children's efficiency in learning to read is that no one reading program can meet the diverse needs of individual learners. There is a need for educators to critically examine current models of reading instruction to eliminate what is ineffective and to discover the most effective ways to teach reading. Although no one literacy model can ever represent the range of diverse learners in our schools, Cunningham, Hall and Defee's literacy model known as

Four-Block attempts to meet the needs of as many learners as possible through their multilevel, hands-on, developmentally appropriate literacy model.

The purpose of this research was to find reading improvements for all reading levels. The top readers all the way down to the low readers deserve an opportunity at success in their educational careers. When children are given the opportunity to become good readers, they are more likely to be successful in other areas of learning. This research provided an enriched opportunity for differing levels of first grade readers to improve their reading readiness through the "Working with Words" block of the *Four-Block* literacy model.

Statement of the Problem

In this study the researcher looked at the effects the "Working with Words" block of the *Four-Block* literacy model by Cunningham, Hall and Defee had on differing levels of readers.

Definition of Terms

Non-Ability Grouped-the entire class participates in the instruction of reading, instead of children being put into different reading groups based on their abilities.

Multilevel- Meeting the needs of all children at varying levels of needs.

Four-Blocks- a literacy model by Cunningham and Hall that aims reading instruction to meet the wide range of entering levels without placing them in fixed ability groups. It is multilevel and multimethod instruction.

IRI- informal reading inventory. The most widely known non-standardized direct measure of reading level.

Independent Reading Level-Achieving a score of ninety-nine percent or higher word recognition and ninety percent or higher comprehension on an IRI. The independent level is the level at which a person can read with understanding and ease, without assistance.

Instructional Reading Level- Achieving a score of eighty-five percent or higher word recognition and seventy-five percent or higher comprehension on an IRI. The instructional level is the level at which a person can read with understanding with the teacher's assistance.

Frustration Reading Level-Achieving a score of eighty-five percent or below word recognition and fifty percent or below comprehension on an IRI. The frustration level is the level at which a person is unable to function adequately, because the reading material is too difficult.

Making Words- a book by Cunningham that implements the "Working with Words" block of the *Four-Block* literacy model. It is a multilevel, hands-on, developmentally appropriate spelling and phonics activity book.

Limitations

There are four limitations that affected the data of this research project.

Normal phonics instruction was taught in the control classroom. Additional phonics instruction was taught in the experimental classroom for the purposes of the research.

The length of time given for the research project was six weeks.

The two sample classrooms studied were not truly random samples of academic abilities.

The "Working with Words" block of the *Four-Block* literacy model is the only block in the experimental classroom that was tested quantitatively. The experimental class received the other three aspects of the *Four-Block* literacy model, but in more informal settings and not as consistently. The other three blocks cannot be quantitatively tested; therefore they were not a part of the experimental research.

Assumptions

It is assumed that both the experimental group and the control group had equal ability levels. All the children in the first grade were divided into high, medium and low groups based on teacher recommendations. Then one-by-one the principal and curriculum generalist placed an equal number from each reading level into each first grade classroom.

Hypothesis

This research project tested one hypothesis.

The experimental group of first graders will show no difference at the .05 level of significance from the control group in their average instructional reading levels tested by an IRI.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Problem Description: Literacy Models

There is a need for effective literacy models in teaching reading. For too many years children have been taught to read through the use of ineffective reading programs. In schools today, some children have no difficulty achieving in the present reading programs while other children remain poor readers sealing their academic fate. "Whether or not students are viewed as poor readers today depends a lot on how you define reading, what you measure and value, and how test scores are interpreted"(c. Routman, p. 4-5).

On the one hand, if the basics of how children are reading in terms of decoding the words on a literal level are examined, children in today's schools are achieving quite well. On the other hand a closer look shows that student ability to understand and apply material appears insufficient (c. Routman, p. 5). Reading problems in elementary schools today are multidimensional; they go beyond ineffective literacy programs. Elementary teachers know that all children learn how to read differently, making it difficult for any one reading program to meet the needs of all diverse learners. This is the reason why good literacy programs need to find their way into elementary schools. "Research shows that you can teach some of the children some of the time with one program, but you can't teach all the children all of the time with the same program" (Spiegel, p. 115).

Elementary school classroom teachers are taking on the role of accelerating reading growth in struggling readers. This shift from the previous reliance upon special

education and compensatory teachers to teach children with difficulties in reading calls for strong reading programs in these elementary classrooms (Duffy-Hester, p. 480-481). All readers, especially readers that struggle, need more than short-term intervention. They also need reading instruction that is effective within their regular classroom programs (Duffy-Hester, p. 481). When both excelling and struggling readers are in the same classroom, the range of reading instruction is widened. This compels elementary school teachers to meet the needs of all readers in classrooms through effective reading programs. What components of elementary classroom reading programs promote such growth? What strengths should reading programs include? (Duffy-Hester, p. 480). "Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of [a reading] program is that it provides a concrete, instructional model for elementary school teachers to use when implementing their reading instructional program" (Duffy-Hester, p. 485).

History of Reading Programs

The pendulum has swung for decades on what is the best and most effective way to teach reading. The two methods at the center of the debate for the past couple of decades are phonics and whole language. "There are those that have ordained phonics as the eleventh commandment: Thou *shall teach phonics"*(b. Routman, p. 8). Critics of whole language claim phonics isn't being taught. Whole language supporters put phonics in the context of reading predictable and whole texts, as one of the cueing systems that goes along with meaning and structure. The debate between whole language and phonics boils down to whether whole language provides sufficient skills for teaching beginning readers and whether skilled instructions are addressed (Dahl and Scharer, p. 584). The history of teaching reading has required the choice of either phonics or whole language

(b. Routman, p. 8-9). "The reality is and has always been that phonics is part of whole language" (b. Routman, p. 9).

Phonics

Beginning in the sixties, research known as the First-Grade Studies looked at reading programs. These studies found that beginning reading programs containing stronger and more systematic phonics components produced more statistically significant reading achievement than programs that contained weaker phonics programs and basal readers that focused on reading for meaning (Chall, p. 8). These studies also concluded that although teaching phonics was essential, it was not the only necessary component to reading instruction. Language, good teaching and instructional materials on appropriate ability levels were also necessary (Chall, p. 8). The most influential arguments for the teaching of phonics in the early nineties were based on studies that compared the effectiveness of different approaches to teaching reading. Programs with letter-to-sound correspondences gained higher achievement in spelling and word recognition (Adams, p. 31).

Before information can be digested; it is important to define phonics. "Phonics refers to a system of teaching reading that builds on the alphabetic principle, a system of which a central component is the teaching of correspondences between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciation" (Adams, p. 50). Almost all-reading programs teach phonics at some level. The amount of phonics instruction becomes a question of balance (Adams, p. 50-51).

Another debate in phonics is invented spelling. The people who rail against invented spelling are those who want to see more phonics-based instruction (b. Routman, p. 8). "The irony is that invented spelling relies on phonics" (b. Routman, p. 8). Invented spelling requires children to match and apply sound and letter to compose text, which is a phonics strategy (b. Routman, p. 8). Read researched children using invented spelling. His research convinces us that children tend to depend on and use the relations between sounds and letters in order to spell words. Many invented spellers are seen as phonologically fluent, their spelling attend to phonemes as they tried to represent them with letters (Goswami and Bryant, p. 51). Invented spelling has its place in the world of phonics, but maybe enthusiasm for children's invented spelling should be looked at with eyes of caution. Although invented spelling helps to facilitate phonological awareness and letter/sound correspondence, the English language is not all spelled on the basis of letter-sound relationship (Goswami and Bryant, p. 51).

All good research on phonics and invented spelling shows its beneficial use. "Children's developmental spelling in kindergarten or beginning in first grade [is] a strong predictor of reading achievement at the end of first grade" (Cunningham and Cunningham, p. 106-7). A suggested solution is to combine the strategies of invented spelling and the knowledge of the English languages' lack of letter/sound correspondence. "[This strategy] sees the stage of invented spelling as one of the first steps. Children quite heavily rely on a phonological code when spelling, and as they become more experienced, they add other codes as well" (Goswami and Bryant, p. 53).

Whole Language

The spectrum of reading programs begins with phonics on one end and ends with whole language on the other. Whole language is a literacy approach where natural development of literacy is favored over the teaching of explicit skill instruction (Pressley, p. 10). The transition in the early nineties from skill-based learning to whole language was not easy. Moving into a whole language classroom of instruction was not the ecstasy or solution many teachers envisioned (Walmsley and Adams, p. 272). Whole language is seen as the literacy trend of the nineties and many view it as the culprit of why children in the past decade have struggled in learning how to read. Whole Language has been very misunderstood by a great majority of teachers (Walmsley and Adams, p. 272). Whole Language includes more than themes and books. Whole language advocates view phonics as one of the cueing systems that children use along with syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic information, during reading and writing (Dahl and Scharer, p. 584). Whole language views itself as a balanced literacy program that includes: writing, reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and language opportunities (b. Routman, p. 31). "The core of whole language is providing children with interesting texts and helping them understand these text" (Krashen, p. 26).

Goodman provides a good summation of the purpose and meaning behind whole language:

> In indicating what's whole about whole language, the characterization of whole language teachers and the criteria for whole language teaching are those of the author. Whole language

> is clearly a lot of things to a lot of people; it's not a dogma to be narrowly practiced. It's a way of bringing together a view of language, a view of learning, and a view of people, in particular two special groups of people: kids and teachers. Nothing in this book should discourage any teacher or group of teachers from developing their own version of whole language (Goodman, p. 5).

Balanced Reading Programs

Literacy programs in the United States have found themselves at different crossroads over the past several decades. Phonics has been the trend ever since the sixties; whole language made its way into the arena in the nineties. There have been other smaller fine tunings to literacy programs in between. America is again at the crossroads as the turn of the century has been reached (Spiegel, p. 114). As America's literacy programs once again hang in the balance the solution to our problem has been right under our noses. Searching for the silver bullet, the answer to literacy education for children is not a move away from whole language nor is it to swing back to heavy phonics emphasis (Spiegel, p. 114). The solution comes from the idea of a balanced reading program. Literacy educators are learning that to adopt a "one size fits all mentality" goes against the interest of teaching children how to read. One size does not fit all; children learn in their own way, at their own individual pace. Research shows that literacy programs work for some children, but no approach works for all children (Spiegel, p. 114). Educators in the literacy arena have made a habit of throwing away any program or philosophy that was not the magical answer. The mistake was first made when all children were not learning to read and write through intensive phonics. All

phonics instruction was thrown out because it didn't seem to have all the magic (Spiegel, p. 115). "Program A wasn't the silver bullet, ergo all of program A is wrong" (Spiegel, p. 115). The whole language movement was the last decades' magically innovative solution to literacy problems and now that it isn't solving all literacy problems it too runs the risk of being thrown out. Where are literacy programs moving next? Back to phonics, and the pendulum continues to swing. It is time to stop the pendulum, and balanced literacy programs allow us to do so (Spiegel, p. 115).

Balanced-literacy teachers combine the strengths of whole language with skills instruction, this creates an instruction that is more than the sum of its parts (Pressley, p. 1). According to Fitzgerald, a balanced reading program is more than just holistic ideas. Balanced reading perspective includes local knowledge about reading-phonological awareness, global knowledge-understanding, interpretation and response to reading, love of reading-feelings, positive attitude, motivation and a desire to read (Fitzgerald, p. 104). Spiegel defines a balanced approach to literature as "a decision-making approach through which the teacher makes thoughtful choices each day about the best way to help each child become a better reader or writer" (Spiegel, p. 116). A balanced approach maintains what research has already shown as effective while being responsive to new issues. This approach frees teachers to be decision makers that fine tune their teaching daily to meet the needs of each individual child in his/her classroom (Spiegel, p. 116).

A study done on improving attitudes toward reading by Alison Gunner a St. Xavier student finds its solution through the use of a balanced reading approach. The proposed study used two third grade classrooms to test their balanced reading program.

In Gunner's research a balanced reading program included a balance of reading aloud, shared reading and writing, guided reading and writing, sustained silent reading, shared or interactive writing, and modeled writing (Gunner, et. al., p. 8). The balanced reading program was used to try and foster an increase of reading comprehension and as a tool for an improvement in attitude toward reading (Gunner, et. al., p. 9). Gunner used a pretest and posttest to evaluate discrepancies in reading comprehension scores and an attitudinal survey was given to evaluate students feeling toward reading (Gunner, et. al., p. i). The reading comprehension posttests demonstrated increased growth in reading comprehension within the targeted third grade and post surveys provided information to support attitude improvement towards reading (Gunner, et. al., p. i).

Regie Routman's perspective brings an even different view in the area of balanced reading programs. The cutting edge ideas of balanced reading programs were seen in Routman's book *Invitations*, published in the early nineties, which called for a balanced reading and writing program. Her program was a literacy program that included basic component texts for teaching and learning (a. Routman, p. 15). "By balance, [Routman] meant that all aspects of reading and writing received the appropriate emphasis and guided contexts were used to help readers and writers become critical thinkers, independent problem solvers, self-motivators, self-evaluators, and goal setters" (a. Routman, p. 15). The teacher acted as a facilitator who intervened in response to the students' interests and needs. "The word balance began to take on a curious and disturbing meaning" (a. Routman, p. 15). A balanced reading program originally denoted

equilibrium between all parts of teaching reading and is now being changed by some into another swinging trend. Routman clears up her definition of balance in her newest book on reading research, *Conversations*. In her book she states "balance is a mindset of teaching reading not a set program" (a. Routman, p. 15). Teacher's goals are to meet the needs of all students, not a few. Therefore teachers must act as facilitators of many different methods so they are careful to avoid the narrow road in reading instruction.

Four Blocks Literacy Program

Cunningham started the *Four Blocks* literacy model along with Hall and Defee based on their 1991 research. They "wanted to figure out how to provide reading instruction to children with a wide range of entering levels without putting them in fixed ability groups" (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 652). *Four Blocks* is a multilevel, multimethod model of reading instruction. The title *Four Blocks* represents the four aspects of reading that need to be taught to children to ensure the most efficient way to reach all levels of readers. *Four Blocks* considers itself to be a balanced reading program.

The four blocks include:

Shared/Guided Reading- this is considered the basal block. This is where basals are used as well as other materials.

Self-selected Reading- children choose what they want to read, and to what parts of their reading they want to respond.

Writing- this part is carried out in a Writers' Workshop fashion. The teacher models all the things writers do. The teacher thinks aloud-- deciding what to write about-- and then writes. The teacher also models looking at the Word Wall for troublesome words.

Working with Words- "children learn to read and spell high-frequency words and learn the patterns that allow them to decode and spell lots of words" (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 652-56).

The Research

Cunningham, Hall and Defee set out in the late eighties to attempt to meet the needs of a diverse first-grade population, without the use of the age old reading method, ability-grouping (a. Cunningham, et. al., p. 566). One feature of most first-grade reading instruction is the presence of three or four ability groups (reading groups). Children are usually placed in these groups at the beginning of the year and remain there until school ends. Being placed in a lower level group leaves a child little room to grow or improve and move outside the box in which they have been placed (a. Cunningham, et. al., p. 566). Many teachers are aware of the unfair disadvantage ability grouping places on low ability children, but they don't know what to do with these children. Children in first-grade come to teachers with all different kinds of backgrounds and ability levels (a.Cunningham, et. al., p. 566).

Cunningham, Hall and Defee "set out to develop a model of first-grade instruction that did not use ability grouping but did meet the diverse needs of a heterogeneous class of first graders" (a. Cunningham, et. al, p. 566). In an elementary school in the southeastern United States, Cunningham, Hall and Defee used one first-grade classroom out of five as a part of their case study. One of the five classrooms was given a group of ten children who were reading at the primer level to begin first-grade and two other groups that were ready to begin reading instruction. The other four classes were divided up into a mix of children. One of these four classrooms was Cunningham, Hall and Defee's case study. Their class of 24 consisted of 12 boys and 12 girls and it included 7 children of different ethnicities and language backgrounds.

During this study three teachers were involved. One teacher did all the teaching while the other two tested and observed for an entire year. The first six weeks the children began process writing, shared reading, and daily language experience activities. During this time observations were made for grouping purposes. Three groups could be made, if they were going to ability-group-nine children in the top, five in the middle, and ten children in the bottom group. During the remainder of the year, daily observations were done, half-way through the year students were given the Sand Concepts test, a test of letter recognition and common beginning sight words, a test to see how many words a student could write in 10 minutes, and a sentence dictation task. After every basal level was completed, students were tested individually on their knowledge of high frequency words.

At the very end of the year an Informal Reading Inventory was administered. All of this testing and observation led Cunningham, Hall and Defee to the conclusion that in this century four major approaches stand out in beginning reading instruction (a. Cunningham, et. al., p.566-568). One of the approaches is the basal approach; it emphasizes gradual level increase on teacher guided/short reading selections. Phonics is a second approach; the emphasis is on learning letter/sound relationships. A literature approach allows children to select what they desire to read and do so independently with teacher assistance when needed.

Finally, the writing approach allows children to be involved with their reading through writing some of the first selections to be read. Some children do better in one

approach over another; therefore in general a combination approach of reading instruction is most appropriate (a. Cunningham, et. al., p. 568).

In addition to gleaning this insight on four solid methods to teaching reading, Cunningham, Hall and Defee found success in their first-grade class. Some of the children who would have been in the bottom group scored on instructional level or higher on their IRI and other children who would have been in the top group were reading above second-grade level (a. Cunningham, et. al., p. 570). "Based on these results, we believe that our non-ability-grouped instruction was very effective for bottom children and did not hinder the progress of the top children" (a. Cunningham, et. al., p. 570). Cunningham, Hall and Defee believed they found success in this four-method style of teaching. Success occurred first, because they had a good teacher. Second, the four blocks represented a variety of ways to teaching reading and writing. Third, adjustments were made based on observation and assessment data; children spent no time on traditional seatwork and fourth, because all children were given the same kind of meaning-based reading and writing instruction (a. Cunningham, et. al., p.571).

The Research Revisited

Cunningham, Hall and Defee embarked on a journey to figure out how to provide reading instruction to meet the needs of a wide variety of learners and abilities without placing them in fixed ability groups (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 652). Eight years later their research had developed into a program of multilevel, multimethod instruction

known as *Four Blocks*. As Cunningham, Hall and Defee revisited the studies they completed eight years ago their goals became fulier expressions of their original intent of avoiding ability-grouped reading instruction. In addition to their goal, Cunningham, Hall and Defee saught to avoid the pendulum swing of reading instruction by adopting a method that combined major approaches in reading instruction (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 653). Cunningham, Hall and Defee's *Four Blocks* has developed into a formalized plan. Reading instruction in this plan consists of four 30-40 minute blocks where each day children are involved in guided reading, self-selected reading, writing and working with words (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 653). Since the original study done in 1991, hundreds of schools have adopted this program in their classrooms. In January 1996, 100 first graders in classrooms using *Four Blocks* and 100 first graders not using *Four Blocks* were randomly selected and given the Word Recognition Isolation and Word Recognition in context section of the BRI-Basic Reading Inventory. Adjusted mean scores showed that both measures favored the *Four Blocks* classroom (d. Cunningham, et. al. p., 661).

Four Blocks Recent Research

In 1997, the Indiana Department of Education began the Early Literacy Intervention Grant Program (ELIGP) to try and increase the literacy skills of students in grades K-3 who were at risk for failure. This grant supported half of the schools in the area of professional development for teachers, while the other half of the schools were funded for projects referred to as Other Early Literacy Interventions (OELI). One of these OELI projects was a study and evaluation of the *Four Blocks* literacy program created by Cunningham, Hall and Defee. ELIGP was funding projects that had a research

base and a potential for improving early literacy (Manset, et. al., p. iii). The Indiana Education Policy Center chose to look at three sites of the larger intervention programs to better understand literacy intervention programs. *Four Blocks* was one of these programs. Qualitative methods were used in this investigation (Manset, et. al., p. 55). The following summed up the *Four Blocks* method's implemented theoretical approach: "different instructional methods yield different results; reading can be complicated; and . . . only by using different methods (i.e., *Four Blocks*) can the complexity of reading and literacy be passed on" (Manset, et. al., p.57). Children learn differently therefore teachers have to reach their students by using all four blocks (Manset, et. al., p.57). Research teams commented that *Four Blocks* has no reliable research base, but that it deploys in a logical way features used successfully in other well-researched programs (Manset, et. al., p.56). The research teams found that despite the lack of research base *Four Blocks* has intended links to literacy outcomes that are sound. They also stated that more attention could be paid to professional development and parent involvements, both of these aspects reinforce classroom instruction. Overall "it appears that teachers at this school benefited from the collaborative nature of the *Four Blocks* process, and were satisfied with the progress their students were making" (Manset, et. al., p.61).

Four-Block Components

In order to meet the goal of providing children with a variety of approaches to becoming literate, language arts instruction time is evenly divided between four major historical approaches to reading instruction. Four 30-40 minute time slots are allotted for

the four blocks: writing, guided reading, working with words, and self-selected reading (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 653).

Writing

Cunningham, Hall and Defee made writing one of their four most important approaches to reading instruction. In their model, writing is multi-level to help some children engage not only in writing experiences, but also to help many children figure out reading (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 656). Writing and reading have an important relation to each other (Stainthorp and Hughes, p. 2). As a child learns to read they become more familiar with more words to write and as a child writes words they build decoding skills in reading. The same is true for listening and reading, speaking and writing; listening and speaking are aspects of language, but reading and writing are language-plus (Stainthorp and Hughes, p. 2). "One of the most important tasks, if not the most important task, of the early-years' teacher is to teach children to read and write" (Stainthorp and Hughes, p. 1). Once children are able to read fluently, accurately and independently they have access to a whole universe of ideas and once they can write they can make concrete their thoughts to take them beyond the confines of the classroom (Stainthorp and Hughes, p. 1).

Research done in a public elementary school in a Mid-western suburban district demonstrates an interpretive research approach used to gather a rich array of data to document and discover information on the practices of what components of a literacy constitute a balanced literacy program in this classroom (Wiencek, et. al., p. 4). In this study of the Complex Model of Balanced Literacy, interactive writing and independent

writing were among the short list of the essentials to creating a balanced and enriched literacy program in early elementary schooling (Wiencek, et. al., p. 5).

Guided Reading

The guided reading block of the *Four Blocks* model spends time in shared reading of predictable books, choral, echo and other shared-reading formats (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 653). This block exposes children to a wide range of literature and teaches comprehension strategies; children learn how to read in materials that become increasingly more difficult (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 653). Children need the skills necessary to decode and verbalize words in a text, but they also need the fluency and enjoyment to understand what they are reading. Guided reading must be more than working with a child to develop strategies it must also envelope teaching them how to make sense out of life (Short, p. 134). "Therefore, students must always read to learn. They do not need to read and then read to learn" (Short, p. 131). Research shows that differing approaches in teaching reading must be based on the teacher as a professional who makes instructional decisions using his/her knowledge of the student (Short, p. 131). This is especially essential in the method of guided reading. A study done to introduce balanced reading programs in two third grade classrooms, chose guided reading as one of the methods to be included in their balanced approach (Gunner, et. al., p. 8). Guided reading is clearly documented as a key component to literacy instruction in schools today.

Working with Words

"In [the Working With Words] block children learn to read and spell high frequency words and learn the patterns that allow them to decode and spell a lot of

words"(d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 656). Research suggests that invented spelling and decoding are two processes that use the same store of phonological knowledge (Cunningham and Cunningham, p. 106). When students are given the opportunity to engage in invented spelling during writing they not only become better spellers, but they develop their decoding ability in reading (Cunningham and Cunningham, p. 107). "In general, as children improve in the phonetic sophistication of their invented spelling, their later success in learning to read words becomes much more likely" (Cunningham and Cunningham, p. 107). "Working with Words" gives children the opportunity to use invented spelling tied with phonetic awareness to form words. Cunningham developed this concept into a spelling instructional strategy called Making Words (Cunningham and Cunningham, p. 107). She published this strategy in 1994, in a book entitled *Making Words*.

Self-selected Reading

Historically referred to as individualized reading, self-selected reading makes up the fourth block of *Four Blocks* (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 654). This block plays an important role in literacy methods. Children in this block are given the choice as to what they read and how they respond to their reading (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 654). Choice plays an important role in [children's] lives (a. Schraw, et. al., p. 705). "Experts concur with this view, suggesting that choice is an important determinant of interest, cognitive processing, motivation and even long-term health" (b. and c. Schraw, p. 705). Kohn stated "choice among younger students affects activity level, creativity, enthusiasm, self-regulation, rate of learning and comprehension" (d. Schraw, p. 705). A better reader

emerges based on the amount of reading practice a child receives. When children are given a choice in reading and individual reading opportunities, they grow as readers. "Regardless of what it is called, self-selected reading is that part of a balanced literacy program when children choose what they want to read and what parts of their reading they want to respond to" (d. Cunningham, et. al., p. 654).

Variable Description

Cunningham, Hall and Defee conducted a study at a large elementary school in the Southeastern United States, where there were five first grade classrooms. Four of the classrooms were distributed to include varying ranges of reading abilities. The fifth class was given a group of ten children who were reading at the primer level. They also had two groups of children ready to begin reading instruction. Only one of the classrooms was the experimental group, it was a mixed ability grouped first grade classrooms. The class had 24 children, 12 boys and 12 girls. In this experimental classroom, what became known as the *Four Blocks* literacy model was tested.

Conclusion

Learning to read is a challenge children must face; for this reason it is important for them to feel successful. Children are all different in how they learn to read, making the job of helping each one to feel successful difficult. Just as all children learn how to read differently, there is no one way to effectively approach reading to meet the needs of all these variations. The need in the literacy arena today is for a balanced approach to teaching reading, a program that tailors to the individual not the masses. Neither whole language nor phonics, nor a balanced reading program is large enough for this task. Paradigms in the field of reading are going to have to shift from a one-cure approach to a

balanced mindset in teaching reading. A balanced mindset in reading is essential for teachers to adapt to best meet the needs of every reader in his/her class. Balance in reading is an awareness that uses many differing strategies to reach the most children in learning how to read. "In general, combination approaches to beginning reading seem to be the most effective" (b. and c. Cunningham, p. 568). Regie Routman no longer calls for balance in reading and writing because of the misrepresentation of wording. "In place of balance, [she] speak[s] about a comprehensive literacy program. Effective teaching draws on current research and practice and depends on the teacher as a professional to provide learners the balance of skills, strategies, materials, and social and emotional support they need" (Routman p. 15). By paradigmatically changing the mindset of teachers and administrators in terms of reading pedagogy the result may be young readers finding their place in the reading world.

Chapter 3

METHODS AND PROCEDURE

Selection of the Subjects

The subjects in this study were two first grade classrooms. One classroom had twenty children between the ages of five and seven and the other classroom had twenty-two children between the ages of five and seven. They came from a variety of family backgrounds. There were three African American children in the experimental classroom and one Mexican; the rest of the subjects are Caucasian. In the control classroom there was one African American child and one child with a multi-ethnic background. The research was conducted at a suburban school in East Tennessee, which is slowly moving to a mixture of urban and suburban.

Timeline

This research was conducted in a six-week block of time during the winter months. At the end of the six-week period of time an IRI was given to each child in both the control and experimental first grade classrooms. The IRI measured any differences between the experimental first grade classroom and the control first grade classroom in their reading level scores.

Research Design

During a six-week period of time the researcher worked with 22 students in the experimental group using the book *Making Words* (Cunningham). This book implements the "Working with Words" block of the *Four Blocks* literacy model created by Cunningham, Hall and Defee. Using the *Making Words* book the researcher worked fifteen minutes each day with the experimental group on the various

multi-level, hands-on and developmentally appropriate spelling and phonics activities. The children in the control classroom received phonics instructions in various forms, but did not receive the fifteen minutes a day instruction from the Making Words activity book. After the period of six-weeks was up the researcher tested the 22 children in the experimental classroom and the twenty children in the control classroom by giving them an IRI. Then the researcher compared the data from each classroom.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation used to test both the experimental and control classroom was an IRI. The IRI or Informal Reading Inventory is an instrument designed to test both reading levels and reading comprehension. In this study only the data from the reading levels will be used. The testing began by first asking students to read through lists of words from the San Diego Quick Assessment. Each list of words represents a certain grade level and level of the IRI. When a student missed more than two words on a list, he/she was tested at that IRI level. For example, if the student missed three words on the Preprimer 1 word list the student was given the IRI at the Preprimer 1 level. The objective in this study was for students to reach their instructional reading level. If students reached their instructional reading level with the first test then, the testing was over and the student was placed in that particular reading level. If the student scored an independent reading level for that test, then the student went on to the next IRI level. Students continued to take the next IRI level until they reach their instructional reading level. Students who scored at the frustration level on the IRI at a specific level were moved down to an easier test and they continue until their instructional level was found.

Test

The subjects were given an Informal Reading Inventory at the end of the sixth week. The IRI tested each child's instructional reading level.

A	1	Preprimer 1
B	2	Preprimer 2
C	3	Preprimer 3
D	4	2nd Reader level
E	5	3rd Reader level
F	6	4th Reader level

The chart above shows the instructional reading levels that the experimental and control first grade classrooms tested on. The first reader has three divisions designating them A, B, and C. A being the most basic and C being the most advanced at this level. The following levels contain no divisions. Level two will be designated as D, level three will be designated as E, and level four will be designated as F. Each level represents a number to determine where each child in both the experimental and control classrooms scored. Each child could only be placed on one of the levels.

Experimental Factor

The experimental factor in this research is the influence of the "Working with Words" block of the *Four-Blocks* literacy model on the achievement of a first graders instructional reading level.

Statistical Analysis

The researcher compared subjects that used the "Working with Words" block of the *Four-Blocks* literacy model, using the Making Words phonics activity book, with subjects that experience traditional reading instruction in learning how to read. The researcher used t-test to look at the relationship between the two variables.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

An independent t-test compared the instructional reading levels of both the experimental and control first grade classrooms. In the "Working With Words" block of the *Four Blocks* reading program Cunningham's phonics activity book *Making Words* was used. After the experimental classroom was exposed to the "Working With Words" block no difference was found at the .05 level of significance from the control group in their average instructional reading levels tested by an IRI. The researcher retains the hypothesis.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF AVERAGE INSTRUCTIONAL READING LEVELS FOR THE EXPERIIMENTAL AND CONTROL FIRST GRADE CLASSROOMS

Groups	N	Mean	Mean Difference	Std. Error of Means	t ratio	Sig. 2-tailed
Experiment (Making Words Program)	22	2.0909	-.3591	.4654	-.772	.445*
Control (No Making Words Program)	20	2.4500				

*** Not Significant**

There was not a significant increase in instructional reading levels for the experimental first grade classroom compared to the control first grade classroom(Table 1). Teaching children using the "Working With Words" block of the *Four Blocks* reading program did not make a significant difference in the child's reading ability, as measured by the IRI.

Chapter 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of Research

Four Blocks, a balanced reading program created by Cunningham, Hall and Defee seeks to meet the diverse needs of children in teaching them how to read. In this program children spend a certain amount of time in each block of instruction. The four blocks are Writing, Self-Selected Reading, Guided Reading and Working With Words. In this study, the Working with Words block was tested using a phonics program also created by Cunningham called *Making Words*. This study compared two first grade classrooms. The experimental classroom received the *Making Words* instruction for a six-week block of time everyday for twenty minutes a day, while the control first grade classroom did not receive this instruction. The study investigated whether there was a significant difference between the two classrooms in their instructional reading levels.

Conclusions

The use of the phonics program *Making Words* in the "Working with Words" block of the *Four Blocks* program did not make a significant difference. *Making Words* is designed to be used all year long and in this study was only used for a six-week period of time. This could have affected the results of the study. Although *Making Words* was not used in the control classroom other phonics programs were being used and this also could have affected the results of this study. For this program to be effective teachers must use the "Working with Words" block of phonics instruction daily. The consistency and repetition of the program is what helps students learn the many different phonetic rules. The more practice the students receive the more likely they are to remember

how to sound out and spell words in their reading and writing practices. Although there are other phonics programs that practice word formation, Cunningham's book, *Making Words*, was designed specifically for the *Four Blocks* reading program. *Making Words* allows each student to manipulate the letters individually at their desks while observing the teacher placing the letters on the board. This method gives children time to think at their own level. It is the key to achieving multi-ability phonics learning with an entire classroom.

Several factors may have contributed to the research results showing no significance between the experimental and control classrooms. The phonics program was used for a six-week period of time. If the experimental classroom had been exposed to the program for a longer period of time this might have influenced the outcome of the research.

The principal of the school selected the students in both the experimental and control classrooms. An assumption was made that the ability levels in each first grade classroom was equal. After the school year began, five children in the experimental classroom were determined to be significantly below grade level in the area of reading. These students demonstrated growth from the beginning of the year to the end, but at the end of the year these students were still working below grade level in reading. Five students in the experimental classroom scored at an instructional reading level of zero.

The students in the control classroom were still receiving some type of phonics instruction when the experimental classroom received the *Making Words* phonics instruction.

Recommendations

The reading program, *Four Blocks* represents what is known in reading research as a balanced reading program. In this study, the researcher was only able to test one of the four blocks. Testing only the Working with Words Block only produced information about the phonetic aspect of teaching reading. It would be a beneficial study to set up a classroom where all four of the blocks (Writing, Working With Words, Guided Reading, and Self-Selected Reading) could all be tested to determine the effectiveness of the entire program. The research on this program needs to be conducted for an extended period of time. This study only lasted for six weeks. It may not have been enough time to show any significant differences.

Replicating the Study

Changes should be made in order to replicate this study in the area of testing. The IRI was an effective tool in determining the student's instructional reading levels. A more effective way to use the IRI the next time would be to use only one classroom in the study and give an IRI as a pre-test before the experimentation and then as a post test at the end. Using the IRI in this way would increase the possibility of a significant difference showing up in the data.

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APPENDICIES

APPENDIX A

KNOX COUNTY SCHOOLS
ANDREW JOHNSON BUILDING

Dr. Charles Q. Lindsey, Superintendent

November 13, 2000

Ms. Dawn I. Morris
6011 Sunbeam Lane, Apt. 203
Knoxville, Tennessee 37920

Dear Ms. Morris:

You are granted permission to contact appropriate building-level administrators concerning the conduct of your proposed research study entitled, "A Comparison of First Grade Children that Receive Instruction in the 'Working with Words' Block of the 4-Block Literacy Model and First Graders who Have Not Received this Instruction." In the Knox County schools final approval of any research study is contingent upon acceptance by the principal(s) at the site(s) where the study will be conducted.

In all research studies names of individuals, groups, or schools may not appear in the text of the study unless *specific* permission has been granted through this office. The principal researcher is required to furnish this office with one copy of the completed research document.

Good luck with your study. Do not hesitate to contact me if you need further assistance or clarification.

Yours truly,

Samuel E. Bratton, Jr.

Samuel E. Bratton, Jr., Ed.D.
Coordinator of Research and Evaluation
Phone: (865) 594-1740
Fax: (865) 594-1709

Project No. 114

APPENDIX B

December 11 , 2000

West Hills Elementary School
409 Vanosdale Road
Knoxville, TN 37909
(615)539-7850

Dear Parents,

Learning how to read is the most important thing your child will do in the first grade. As a part of my internship with Mrs. Countiss's class I am required to conduct a research project. For my research project I am going to work with your child daily for a six week period using a literacy program called Four-Block. I will specifically be working with the "Working with Words" block of the program. "Working with Words" specifically focuses on daily phonics and spelling activities that are aimed at helping children as they are learning how to read. As a part of my research I will be administering a reading test to your child. If you could please sign and return the attached form it will allow me to use your child's score in my research. Thank you, I look forward to working with your child.

If you have any questions please call me at (865) 579-0815. Thank you for your help.

Thank you,

Tammy Countiss

Vicki Andrews

Dawn Morris

January 16, 2001

West Hills Elementary School
409 Vanosdale Road
Knoxville, TN 37909
(615)539-7850

Dear Parents,

As a part of my internship I am required to conduct a research project. For my research project I will need to administer a reading test to both your child in Mrs. Przybyszewski's class and the children in Mrs. Countiss' class. If you could please sign and return the attached form it will allow me to use your child's score in my research. Thank you, I look forward to working with your child.

If you have any questions please call me at (865) 579-0815. Thank you for your help.

Thank you,

Diane Przybyszewski

Vicki Andrews

Dawn Morris

APPENDIX C

Please sign and return as soon as possible.

Thank you,

Dawn Morris

I _____ give my child _____ permission to participate in Mrs. Countiss's classroom research.

I _____ do not give my child _____ permission to participate in Mrs. Countiss's classroom research.

Date:

Please sign and return as soon as possible.

Thank you,

Dawn Morris

I _____ give my child _____ permission to participate in Mrs. Przybyszewski's classroom research.

I _____ do not give my child _____ permission to participate in Mrs. Przybyszewski's classroom research.

Date:

BEST COPY AVAILABLE